

## CRITICAL THINKING

# 5 Tips for Modeling Healthy Bias Awareness for Children



We all pick up racial biases as we take in messages from the world around us. It can be difficult and take courage to acknowledge our biases, but it is so important that we do. We're less likely to pass on biases we identify explicitly and work deliberately to overcome. Being open and vulnerable about bias with children can help shape their mindsets about prejudice, sending the message that prejudice is not a fixed part of one's identity, and we can all make an effort to undo prejudicial thinking and behavior. What is important is that we all learn and grow from our mistakes. When we know better, we can all do better.

1. Learn about implicit biases and interracial anxiety.
2. Raise your awareness of your own biases.
3. Be vulnerable and open with children.
4. Turn awareness into intention and action.
5. Use books to practice identifying, exploring, and overcoming bias.

## 1. Learn about implicit biases and interracial anxiety.

If you're reading this action guide, you likely have strong, conscious attitudes and explicit values in support of racial equity. However, research has demonstrated how we can all hold unconscious biases toward particular racial groups (even our own!) that can influence our behavior, whether we want them to or not.

- The [New York Times](#) offers a series of short, easy-to-understand videos if you want a primer on the basics of implicit bias and racial anxiety.
- [Outsmarting Human Minds](#) offers a variety of excellent quick reads, watches, and listens about different aspects of bias.
- For a deeper dive, read [Blindspot](#) by Mahzarin Banaji and Anthony Greenwald, or [Biased](#) by Jennifer Eberhardt.

- Remember that neither unconscious biases nor conscious egalitarian beliefs represent the ‘Real You.’ Both implicit biases and explicit values are a part of who we are. To do better, we can be mindful of the role that implicit biases could play in our behavior, and guard against them.

## 2. Raise your awareness of your own biases.

We can’t easily get rid of the biases that have become ingrained in us. The key is to become aware of and acknowledge our biases, so we can work to catch ourselves and keep these biases from affecting our behavior.

- Take an Implicit Associations Test (IAT). These tests show how strongly we automatically associate certain traits or concepts with one group of people over another. Are we more likely to associate women with family and men with careers? What about associating weapons and crime with Black people versus White people? Taking IATs can be a good way to learn about our blind spots, where bias is most likely to creep in. [Project Implicit](#) and [Outsmarting Human Minds](#) both have several versions of the IAT you can try.
- Don’t be surprised if your results show some bias! Even when we have great intentions, and our explicit attitudes about race are egalitarian, we absorb stereotypes from our environment of which we might not be aware and that are hard to get rid of.
- Notice when you make a biased assumption about someone. Did you mistake your Black doctor for a nurse or orderly? Did you assume the person referred to as a ‘scientist’ was a White male? Take a moment to correct yourself in your head, by labeling the thought or behavior as stereotypical and replacing it with something else. Apologize if you’ve caused harm to someone.
- Commit to ongoing self-reflection. Who is in your social circle? Who do you feel less comfortable around? How were you raised to think about people from certain groups? How often do you use generalizing language to talk about entire groups of people as ‘they’? How might a student or family’s background have influenced your interaction with them? Seek out resources to guide your reflection, such as questions and activities contained in Annaliese Singh’s [Racial Healing Handbook](#) or [Don’t Look Away: Embracing Anti-Bias Classrooms](#) by Iheoma Iruka, Stephanie Curenton, Tonia Durden, and Kerry-Ann Escayg.

When you know better, do better — as your circumstances allow. While you may not engage in all of these practices consistently, if we hold ourselves accountable to routinely doing what we can, our kids, families, and communities will all do better.



### 3. Be vulnerable and open with children.

As you begin to have conversations about forms of bias, prejudice, and stereotyping, give your child an example of a bias, racial or otherwise, that you hold or have held. By modeling humility and critical self-reflection for our kids, we empower them to recognize their own biases and treat others according to their values.

- Model bias awareness out loud. You might want to start with biases you held in the past. “There was a time when I didn’t know a lot about this group of people, and I wasn’t sure how to act around them.” “I remember when I was young and I made fun of a boy in my class because he didn’t speak English very well and that wasn’t kind and I’m sorry I did it.”
- Express your feelings about acknowledging that bias. “I feel frustrated with myself for judging people without knowing them but I’m going to keep working on it.” “I feel really bad now about that, because I know it was mean and unfair. It makes me sad that I treated someone that way and it’s important to know that I can change.”
- Share with your child things you did or do to confront and overcome that bias. “But you know what I realized? I realized that I should try to get to know some people from that group. And I learned that there’s nothing to be nervous about, and that I can be friends with people from all different backgrounds!” “Now I know that people speak all different languages, and some people sound different from me. I always try to remember not to judge people by how they sound or how they look.”
- [Model awareness of present biases you notice in yourself](#), so that kids know that we are forever works in progress. For example, “When I was walking the other day I passed by a Black man and my immediate reaction was that my body got a little tense and I clutched my purse tighter. I really had to stop and think about why I did that. Why did I judge that person as scary or threatening if I don’t know anything about them? That’s not fair, is it? I had to remind myself that that first reaction was rooted in a bias and a stereotype about Black men.” “Do you remember when we were at the library today, and one of the librarians was an Asian woman? I noticed that a thought flashed through my mind when I saw her. I thought *I wonder where she’s from*. Then I realized that that was a biased thought, because I assumed she was from a different country just based on what she looked like. And I didn’t have the same thought about the other librarians who weren’t Asian. So I realized that I have to keep working on recognizing and challenging stereotypes that I have based on race.”

### 4. Turn awareness into intention and action.

[Acknowledging our biases is a first step](#). We can help ourselves and our children grow by focusing on doing better in the future.

- Acknowledge that our brains sometimes judge people automatically, but we can think carefully and do better! “In the future, I’m going to try not to judge people so quickly.”
- If you notice a bias toward a certain group of people, either in yourself or your child, make an effort to learn more about that group — by reading, or even better, by getting to know people as individuals through real-life interactions!

- If you notice your own stereotypical thoughts toward an individual, seek out more information about that person to deepen your understanding of them as a full, multidimensional person – more than just their racial or ethnic background. This might be especially relevant for educators when tempted to make assumptions about students’ family members.

## 5. Use books to practice identifying, exploring, and overcoming bias.

Just like every other aspect of racial learning, books are a powerful tool to help us explore issues of bias and prejudice and how to overcome them.

Read picture books about characters overcoming prejudice or mistaken first impressions by getting to know others from different racial or cultural backgrounds. Try [Milo Imagines the World](#) by Matt de la Peña; [The Day You Begin](#) by Jacqueline Woodson; [Someone New](#) by Anne Sibley O’Brien; [The Name Jar](#) by Yangsook Choi. Check out [Diverse BookFinder’s](#) “Cross-Group” category for more ideas.

- Draw attention to counter-stereotypical images in the books you read. “You know what I like about this book? I like that it shows characters with all different skin colors doing all different kinds of jobs.” “Oh, look, the mayor of the city is speaking in Spanish with her friends!” Check out [Marisol McDonald Doesn’t Match](#) by Monica Brown for a story about embracing all the different parts of ourselves.
- Practice perspective-taking by encouraging your child to imagine how they would feel if they were in the shoes of characters from different racial backgrounds.

### REFERENCES

Devine, P. G., Forscher, P. S., Austin, A. J., & Cox, W. T. (2012). Long-term reduction in implicit race bias: A prejudice habit-breaking intervention. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 48(6), 1267-1278.

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